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SUBJECT: EMBASSY BAKU EXPANDS MUSLIM OUTREACH THROUGH
RAMAZAN PROGRAMMING

SENSITIVE, BUT UNCLASSIFIED. PLEASE HANDLE ACCORDINGLY.

11. (SBU) Summary: The Embassy this year made a concerted effort to expand our outreach to Azerbaijani Muslims during Ramazan, as part of our broader, long-term effort to engage with local believers. Azerbaijan - a non-Arab, majority Muslim country with a strong secular tradition, a tradition of religious tolerance and a pro-western orientation, is a country in which the USG should generally focus enhanced outreach efforts. We hosted three iftars targeting three audiences - ranging from the official religious establishment to religiously observant youth -- each of which represent an important Islamic dynamic in Azerbaijan. The Ambassador also attended iftars hosted by the Head of the Caucasus Muslim Board, as well as the Saudi and Egyptian Ambassadors, and a first-ever iftar hosted by the Jewish community of Azerbaijan. Common themes binding the three iftars were paying respect to Islam, and sharing common values of peace and tolerance; the participants exhibited an overwhelmingly positive response. The Ambassador participated in the groundbreaking ceremony for the reconstruction of an historic mosque in Gala village, which is being funded through the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation Cooperation. The Ambassador also highlighted the importance of U.S. religious tolerance at the presentation of the Department's booklet "Muslim Life in America," which was translated into Azerbaijani, and visited Azerbaijan's Institute of Oriental Studies to learn more about Azerbaijan's role in Islamic history and research and view the Institute's collection. Visiting U.S. Muslim scholar Dr. Liyakat Takim also spoke to a variety of audience on how Muslims live and worship in America. End Summary.

Iftars Reinforce Respect for Islam

12. (SBU) The Ambassador hosted two iftars, which included a variety of Islamic officials, Ambassadors, and ordinary believers. The first iftar was for GOAJ religious officials and Ambassadors from Muslim countries. Representatives from Azerbaijan's Orthodox, Catholic, and Jewish confessions attended, underscoring the GOAJ's positive track record of cooperation and tolerance among officially-sanctioned religious communities. The goal of this iftar was to deepen our rapport with government-linked religious interlocutors. Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB) spokesperson Haji Akif told us during the iftar that no other western embassy hosted an iftar, and the event was a strong statement of U.S. support for Islam. (The CMB chair publicly echoed his aide's positive comments about U.S. respect for Islam during his speeches at iftars hosted by the Jewish community and the Egyptian Ambassador, at which the US was the only western country represented. The Ambassador also attended the Saudi Ambassador's iftar.) The second iftar included Islamic believers, commentators, and a handful of devout alumni of

U.S. International Visitor Programs (IVP). Without exception, those we had visited the U.S. on IV Programs strongly praised U.S. religious tolerance and respect for Islam in the U.S. to their fellow guests. They noted that attitudes towards Islam in the U.S., in their experience, was very positive is very little known in Azerbaijan or elsewhere in the Muslim world. This second iftar sought to deepen our rapport with believers outside of the official religious structure. A range of participants expressed their gratitude for the event throughout the evening.

13. (SBU) Pol/Econ Chief hosted an additional iftar for young, devout Muslims. A variety of Sunni and Shia believers -- both male and female -- attended this iftar. Local believers shared their thoughts on the significance of Ramazan, along with their perspectives on Islamic trends among Azerbaijani youth. Participants reiterated the often-heard theme of the CMB's declining legitimacy. In response to our question about the percentage of Azerbaijani youth interested in Islam, two attendees estimated 50 percent -- a figure that most participants appeared to agree with, although there was no definition of what constitutes "interest" in Islam. The young women present at the iftar complained that religiously observant, veiled women are unable to obtain jobs in Azerbaijani government agencies, and also noted that very few human rights activists are willing to embrace this cause.

Public Outreach Efforts

14. (SBU) The PD section organized a variety of public activities to highlight U.S. respect for Islam and Muslim life in the United States. The Ambassador on October 10 participated in the groundbreaking ceremony for the reconstruction and refurbishment of an historic mosque in Gala village, which is funded through the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation and carried out by the Ministry of Culture of Azerbaijan. The Ambassador also visited the

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Institute of Oriental Studies and its manuscript collection to reach out to the scholarly community. To address one of the main themes of Ramazan of reaching out to the less fortunate, the Embassy held a charity drive. The clothing, toys and other goods were donated to a refugee camp and orphanages during concerts by entertainer and musician Rennie Kaufmann, who was visiting Azerbaijan on a separate PD-sponsored program. The PD section also organized a series of presentations at local universities on Muslims in America and other topics conducted by the Embassy's staff.

15. (SBU) Two other outreach events spread information about the role of Muslims in America. PD translated a copy of the Department's booklet, "Muslim Life in America," into Azerbaijani and distributed copies at several events. The Ambassador presented this booklet at the local American-educated alumni center, and her comments on religious freedom in America, delivered in Azerbaijani, were carried by local television stations. Second, University of Denver religious studies professor Dr. Liyakat Takim spent several days in Baku speaking at a variety of forums on Muslim life in America.

Comment:

16. (SBU) The Embassy this year made a concerted effort to expand our outreach to Azerbaijani Muslims during Ramazan, as part of our broader, long-term effort to engage with local believers. Azerbaijan -- a non-Arab, majority Muslim country with a strong secular tradition, a tradition of religious tolerance and a pro-western orientation, is a country in which the U.S. should focus enhanced outreach efforts. We believe increased outreach will pay positive dividends, and must be an integral part of our efforts to better understand growing religiosity in this strategically important country. We continue to welcome initiatives and visitors from Washington and ask that the Department increasingly include Azerbaijan as an integral part of its Muslim outreach programs.

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